

University of Dundee

Response to call from Scottish Parliament COVID-19 Committee (Nov 2020)

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Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mercieca, D., & Mercieca, D. (2020, Nov). Response to call from Scottish Parliament COVID-19 Committee (Nov 2020): Topic 3 – Protecting those at risk.

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Response to call from Scottish Parliament COVID-19 Committee (Nov 2020)

Topic 3 – Protecting those at risk

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This is a short summary of research carried out by a group of academics, coordinated by the authors of this document, from the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee. It addresses this topic as it focuses on the education of children during lockdown, as perceived by primary school teachers. All children are seen as needing support during this time, yet this study has highlighted the efforts of primary schools and teachers towards more vulnerable children and families.

Context

A qualitative study was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland. Starting from the second week of lockdown, primary school teachers and Head Teachers who volunteered to participate, were interviewed with the aim of capturing their thoughts about their lived experiences during the lockdown. Following ethical clearance from the University of Dundee Research Ethics Committee, sixty teachers were interviewed. To our knowledge, this study is the only one of its kind, at least in the UK. The COVID-19 lockdown has offered a dilemmatic context where the processes of teaching and learning and being(s) a teacher are being re-visited and re-negotiated. The following are some points that have emerged from analysing the data.

1. The impact of the school building

This study brought to light the importance of the physical school building, which hosts the learning community. Within the building, staff roles and procedures are clearly set up and expectations and targets make sense. It allows for equity and equality to be operationalised, starting from the morning breakfast club, to free school meals, support for learning etc. With the closure of the school building it was difficult for these structures to be maintained and staff went to great lengths to mitigate this to meet children's needs.

2. Teacher relationship with students

The teacher-student relationship is central and needed to be maintained from a distance. Teachers reported reaching out to students in a variety of ways within the confines of the restrictions. Examples of this are through establishing online contact, making regular phone calls, being open to receiving emergency phone calls, delivering food and parcels to families, supporting children with additional support needs, supporting hubs, sometimes even accompanied by their own children. This contact was deemed essential so that teachers could monitor the well-being of children and families who were considered vulnerable. Teachers reported showing their personal lives more to children in attempts to connect.

Concern about students' safety and well-being was predominant in the interviews with both teachers and Head Teachers. Head Teachers reported that there were two categories of vulnerable children and families: those whom the school had already been supporting prior to the lockdown (for example, families with children with additional support needs, or families in poverty), and; those who became vulnerable because of the lockdown, for example, becoming unemployed, or marital breakdown. The tension between union guidance and the agreed actions decided upon at school level was also mentioned in several interviews.

3. Online learning

Teachers gave different accounts of how teaching and learning was addressed in their virtual classes. There were two predominant approaches to teaching: some schools opted to providing students with a weekly grid, supplemented by activities; other schools aimed to upload three activities a day: comprising wellbeing, numeracy and literacy. Some teachers differentiated the tasks consistently, other teachers aimed at taking a class average when posting activities. However, all teachers expressed concern about student engagement with the tasks posted, fearing a widening of the attainment gap for particularly vulnerable students in this time. Although the media were in place (eg: tablets and computers being delivered; wifi established), parental engagement was essential for online learning for primary school children. This was highly emphasised by teachers, who understood that learning at home needed parental involvement. Teachers were caught in the dilemma of acknowledging that parents were not teachers, but realising the necessity of parents so that students could access the learning which was being posted. Challenging home situations (for example, lack of space, parents working from home, vulnerable families) exacerbated this issue. Some teachers opted to post family learning tasks, realising that supporting more than one child in a family online would be challenging for parents.

This scenario is made complex when consideration is made of the expectations of different stakeholders. Some parents expected home learning to take place as though in class, while others eschewed home learning completely. Most teachers supported families with empathy and understanding, saying “you do what you can”. However, there is evidence of whole schools expecting children to meet all the many curricular tasks posted, to ensure that “they hit the ground running” after lockdown. Contrary to some schools who focussed on consolidation, other schools continued teaching the curriculum.

Schools and teachers that established technology use prior to lockdown found the transition to online learning easier. However, many teachers were reported to find it extremely challenging. Collegial support among teachers was reported and appreciated. Teachers also became more exposed through their online posts, as teaching usually occurs within the school. During lockdown, parents mediating learning formed more opinions about the tasks posted, which opinions sometimes extended towards the teacher posting these tasks. With social media replacing parental pick-up and drop-off conversations, Head Teachers reported needing to intervene as some situations risked being escalated. These Head Teachers further reported that teachers were sometime unfairly judged by their online presence as this was what could be seen.

4. Attendance in hubs

Although there are various points to mention with regard to the hubs, we would like to mention one striking point: Although hubs were aimed to support vulnerable children (besides children of key workers) many teachers reported that the complexities of vulnerable family situations prevented students from accessing these hubs. For example, some students had to stay home because they did not have a relevant adult to sign them in and out of the hub, as this was a requirement (these students usually bring themselves to school unaccompanied by an adult).

Concluding note

This summary aims at capturing some of the issues that emerged from this study. A recent Scottish Educational Research Association webinar was given with our interim analysis of outcomes, with greater richness of detail: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnSPjk2gyUU>

A paper published from this research concerns teachers and care during lockdown: https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/55519937/Mercieca_Mercieca_McLennan_Carin_g_Relationships_Paper_MRER.pdf